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ABSTRACT

Teachers represent a connection between students and parents. They have an enormous impact on how the philosophy of a school is translated and communicated to these two groups of constituents. Teachers are also intermediaries between the institution and the students, yet because of their sheer numbers in these institutions, they are also part of the institution. Whether students perceive their teachers as caring or non-caring has a direct impact on how students perceive the culture of the school. To further understand students' perceptions of caring, particularly in the classroom context, middle school students at two Midwestern schools were asked to describe a caring teacher. The interest was in identifying teacher attitudes and behaviors that students interpreted as caring. Results of this study indicate that most students described caring teachers in rather traditional roles related to content or pedagogy. To many students, simply helping with and explaining schoolwork were the main characteristics of caring teachers. (Contains 13 references.) (CCM)

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CARING TEACHERS: ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Interviewer: So how do you know if the teachers care for you?

Susan: I don't know if they do or not!... When I was pregnant, they [my teachers] said they would care for me. One of them came to the delivery room... So I knew that *one* of them cared for me. But the other ones, they just sent me a big ol' card and some balloons and stuff.

Interviewer: That wasn't enough?

Susan: That wasn't enough for me.

Eighth grader Susan's story illustrates the complexity of the issues surrounding any study of the concept of caring. Clearly illustrated in her story is the issue of perspective. Many might say that teachers who send cards and balloons to a student in the hospital are showing caring. It is the conventional caring activity in the situation. Many might, indeed, be surprised that teachers who see as many as 140-160 students a day might take the time for such an effort for one student. Indeed, although sending things to a person in the hospital is not unusual, it might be considered special for busy teachers to be so involved with one student. Thus, as one observer of the situation, one might give the teachers a high score for caring. Then we ask Susan.

From her perspective the story takes a different twist. Caring to Susan was more than an action. Caring was defined by the relationship in which the action was embedded. The broader picture from Susan's perspective includes a promise by the teachers to "care" for her. Clearly, caring to Susan meant more than a card and balloons. It meant being there – physically. Either Susan's meaning of caring was not an interpretation

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shared by both parties or if it were shared at one time, the interpretation changed by the time Susan went into the hospital. The one teacher who cared, by Susan's definition, was the one who came to the delivery room. From this illustration, searches into the meaning of caring cannot be satisfied by looking solely at individual acts, but at the perspectives of the people involved in the caring relationships in which specific caring acts exist.

Noddings (1992) posits that caring is a receptivity to the needs of others. Likewise, James Beane (1990) contends that,

> To *care* about others means that we attempt to see beyond the "desirability" (in our terms) of particular feelings or aspirations and to understand how particular people came to want what they want, to be who they are, and to behave as they do. It also means that we are concerned about their sense of well-being and our part in maintaining or improving it. When we care about others, we do not simply act for people (or their behalf) as "objects" of our care, but also *with* them as mutual "subjects" in the human experience. (p. 62)

The missing voice in much of the conversation about caring in education is that of the students. What do young people see as caring in others? To be able to develop a caring community, students' perspectives must be considered.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers represent the main connection between the students and parents. They have an enormous impact on how the philosophy of the school is translated and communicated to these two groups of constituents. Teachers are also the intermediaries between the institution and the students. Yet, because of their sheer numbers in their institution, they are also part of the institution. Thus, how students perceive their teachers as caring or non-caring has a direct impact on how students perceive the culture of the school.

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Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1996) identify characteristics of a caring instructor in three categories. The first category focuses on content and curriculum. A second category focuses on teaching style, and a third category focuses on personal relationships. For example, Thayer-Bacon and Bacon describe a caring teacher as someone who "acknowledges, rather than ignores, what goes on outside of the classroom as being relevant for student learning" (p.260).

Hayes, Ryan, and Zseller (1993) studied sixth and eighth grade students' perceptions of a caring teacher and identified behaviors that were regularly perceived as caring: (a) provider of fun and humor, (b) helpful with academic work, (c) encourages trust and positive feelings, (d) interested in a student as a person, (e) provides a good subject content, (f) willing to counsel with students, and (g) responsive to the individual outside the classroom. Others found that caring teachers foster relationships at four levels: teacher-student, student-student, teacher-content, and teacher-student-content (Sickle & Spector, 1996).

Caring has also been found to be related to students' outcomes. Noblit and Rogers (1992) found from their observations of fourth-grade classrooms that caring created possibilities for "learning to read, feeling better about yourself through recognizing your capabilities, and learning how to work and play with others" (p. 11). In a longitudinal study of middle school students, Wentzel (1997) found that caring, as perceived by students, "was related significantly and positively to students' pursuit of prosocial and social responsibility goals and to students' academic effort" (p. 414). In their study of English secondary schools, Rutter and his colleagues (1979) found a number of factors, which one could label as *caring*, that influence student outcomes.

These researches found that behavior was better in schools where teachers were available to students for consulting about problems. A more recent study found that students' sense of school as a community was negatively related to drug use, delinquency, and victimization (Battistich & Hom, 1997).

Students' perceptions of caring are also related to the way they evaluate their teachers, the content, and the extent to which they feel they have learned (Teven & McCroskey, 1996). In a study of exemplary junior high schools, Pink (1987) found that the reason students considered a school "exemplar" was that teachers really cared about students, gave everyone help, and were always there when students needed them.

To further understand students' perceptions of caring and particularly in the classroom context, we asked middle school students to describe a caring teacher. Our interest was in identifying teachers' attitudes and behaviors that students interpreted as caring.

Methods

Setting

The study took place in two middle schools in a Midwestern metropolitan area. One school was located in the heart of a major city and is identified as Urban Junior High School. The other school was located in a suburb of the same city and is identified as Suburban Middle School.

Urban drew its seventh- and eighth-grade students mainly from the neighborhood around it, though some students were bused from other sections of the city. The local neighborhood was one of poverty (90% or more of Urban's 800 students qualified for

free or reduced-cost lunches), and it had one of the highest crime rates in the city. The racial mix was 51% African American and 48% European American. Other ethnic groups, such as Hispanics and Asians, were enrolled in very small numbers. At the time of the study, Urban had not passed state standards and was on state probation.

The neighborhoods that fed into Suburban can be described as in transition, with about 30% of the student population moving in and out every year. Although its families represented a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, they mainly consisted of blue-collar workers who were employed in business and commercial enterprises in the local area or in the city itself.

As the only middle school in the district, Suburban had 1,200 students in grades six, seven, and eight. Of those, 12% were African Americans bused in from a poor urban neighborhood as the result of a court-ordered desegregation plan. Another 8% of the students were Appalachian Caucasians from the poorest part of the county.

Participants

The participants consisted of 101 students in five academic teams -- three at the Suburban school, one at each grade level (sixth, seventh, and eighth) and two at the Urban school (seventh and eighth). Of these, 55 were female (36 European American, 18 African American, and 1 Hispanic) and 46 male (33 European American, 12 African American, and 1 Asian). The selection of the participants was based on teacher and peer nominations.

Procedure

All students in the five academic teams received a form that asked them to define caring and to nominate the five most caring peers in their team. The teacher nomination

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form asked teachers to define caring, nominate the five most caring students and the five most uncaring students in their team. The peer nominations were tallied into four groups: ten or more nominations, 5-9 nominations, 1-4 nominations, and no nominations. We used peer and teacher nominations to compile a list of students to interview in each team and school. Because we wanted a representative sample, we chose names from the four peer nomination groups, as well as some that had been nominated by teachers as least caring. We also tried to select a racially and gender balanced sample.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through taped interviews with each individual student. The interviews lasted between 30-40 minutes and involved questions regarding the following areas: definition of caring; how does one care for oneself, good friends and family, people in school, strangers; what are the barriers to caring for self, good friends and family, people in school, strangers; and description of a caring teacher.

Data analysis involved standard methodology in naturalistic inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). After the interview tapes were transcribed, individual descriptors to each question were transferred to 8 inch by 5inch cards which were color coded for schools and included a three letter code of the question, code number for the student followed by two letter codes, the first representing race, and the second gender.

Once all the descriptors to a question had been transferred, they were organized by theme into categories. Further analysis involved "member checking" and triangulation" before the final categories were agreed upon.

Results

Student responses were characterized into two broad themes: teacher behaviors related to content and pedagogy and teacher behaviors that implied a relationship between the student and the teacher. However, both themes dealt with teacher actions that were unidirectional, from the teacher to the student.

Teacher Behaviors Related to Content and Pedagogy

Six teacher behaviors related to content and pedagogy were identified in students' descriptions of a caring teacher: helping with work, explaining work, checking for understanding, encouraging, maintaining an orderly classroom atmosphere, and providing fun activities. Student responses in these areas portrayed teacher actions common in most schools. For example, the largest category, helping with work, included statements such as "[a caring teacher] helps you if you don't understand something;" "if you are stuck in a problem;" "when you ask a question;" "when you are having trouble."

Similarly, to some students a caring teacher explained the material and assignments well. The following exert from a seventh-grade African-American student is a good illustration of the student responses in this category: "[A caring teacher] explains your assignments before you do them, will explain an assignment thoroughly, show you how to do the work before you take it home."

The other categories of teacher behaviors related to content and pedagogy included student responses that portrayed teachers in more active roles. According to some students, a caring teacher actively ascertained student understanding of the material. The teacher did this by asking questions and by walking around the classroom. As an eighth-grade Caucasian male indicated, a caring teacher "doesn't just sit at her

desk and let you do the work." At the same time, a caring teacher provides positive reinforcement for good work. In other words, "she says 'Good job!' when you get an A on a test or something," responded an eighth-grade Caucasian male. To a sixth-grade African-American male a caring teacher also gives encouragement during difficult times: "When you get bad grades, she says, 'you can do better than this.' According to these students, caring teachers provided this sort of encouragement because they wanted their students "to do good."

Student responses indicate that they viewed good classroom management as a very important aspect of a caring teacher's practice. As a seventh-grade Caucasian male indicated, a caring teacher "doesn't let students get by with everything." Thus, to some students providing guidance was a means by which a caring teacher maintained a positive classroom environment. This was particularly important to students who might have been experiencing discipline problems. According to a seventh-grade African-American male, a caring teacher "is on your back a lot. Tells you what to do. Tells you to straighten up." Another one added, "sometimes they can be a little rough or angry with us when trying to look out for our well-being, how we're going to act in the future." Even teacher actions such as calling parents and sending students to the principal's office were seen as caring from the point of view of many students. It was clear that to these students a caring teacher provided an orderly classroom atmosphere that was conducive to learning. An eighth-grade African-American male student described such classroom in the following manner:

> Everyone would be in their seats, doing work. The teacher would go around the room talking to everybody to see how they were doing, to answer questions. Sometimes she'd just say "good job."

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Showing concern was closely tied to the theme of guidance. According to a seventh-grade Caucasian female "a caring teacher wants to make sure you don't get in trouble." An eighth-grade African-American male commented that "if you're failing a class, [a caring teacher] will take you over to the side and tell you what you're doing wrong and try to help you out."

A few students also mentioned planning fun activities such as field trips as characteristics of a caring teacher. However, the number of students who mentioned these types of activities was surprisingly small.

Teacher Behaviors that Foster Relationships

Many student responses illustrated teacher behaviors that implied a relationship between the teacher and the student. According to these students caring teachers accomplished this by treating their students as individuals. As one seventh-grade Caucasian female put it, "she doesn't see you as a unit; she sees each as an individual." In addition, caring teachers were interested in their students at the personal level. Or as a seventh-grade Caucasian male indicated, "she wants to know what type of person you are." Put simply," a caring teacher is not only a teacher but your friend, too" replied a seventh-grade Caucasian female.

Respect is a very important characteristic of a relationship. Thus, teachers who develop relationships with their students respect them. In other words, "they treat you the way they want to be treated" responded one seventh-grade Caucasian male.

A good friend is a good listener and caring teachers "will listen if you have a personal problem," pointed out a sixth-grade Caucasian female. To a seventh-grade Caucasian female, comforting was a very important aspect of such relationship: "If your

feelings are hurt, she'll talk to you about your feelings." Another seventh-grade Caucasian female replied, "If you were like mad at one of your friends and you were really upset and were crying, they would probably help you guys work it out." These teacher behaviors were particularly prevalent in the responses of female students.

To some students, the dynamics of the relationship between the student and teacher extended outside the classroom. This might be expressed by attending extracurricular activities in which students participate. "She comes to every sport I play" reported an eighth-grade Caucasian male.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that most students described caring teachers in rather traditional roles related to content or pedagogy. To many students, simply helping with and explaining schoolwork were the main characteristics of caring teachers. Furthermore, these actions were all initiated by the teacher and directed to the student. These results are rather different from the results of other studies such as those conducted by Schaps, Battistich, & Salomon (1997) who contend that effective schooling involves "important and engaging learning activities." Similarly, none of the students in this study identified any teacher attributes that reflected content or curricula, as was identified by Thayer-Bacon and Bacon. Except for a few students who saw caring related to fun activities, this group of students did not attribute caring to content or curricular issues. Most of the student responses were related to the process that teachers used in the classroom – helping with and explaining work, checking for understanding, encouraging, guiding.

Although many student responses in this study also indicated that caring teachers developed relationships with their students, these relationships did not appear to be characteristic of "classrooms as communities" described by Schaps and others. Indeed, all the teacher behaviors described by the students illustrated a "teacher-student relationship" composed of behaviors initiated by the teacher and directed toward the student. These results are also different from those of Sickle & Spector (1996) who found that caring teachers foster relationships at four levels: teacher-student, student-student, teacher-content, and student-content.

However, the results of the present study were rather similar to the results of a study conducted by Hayes, Ryan, and Zseller (1993). Although Hays and colleagues used somewhat different categories, most of the teacher behaviors described by the sixth and eighth grade students in their study were comparable to those described by the students in this study.

Why did the responses of the students in this study differ so much from the responses of the students in the aforementioned studies? The reason may be twofold. First, except for the study by Hayes and colleagues, the students in the previous studies were provided with scales that included ready-made responses. In the present study, as in Hayes' study, students were simply asked to describe a caring teacher. This discrepancy in the students' responses of the various studies highlights the potential difference between adult and adolescent views of how caring manifests itself in a teacher. The vignette in the introduction of this paper illustrates this discrepancy. Teachers act in a "caring way" according to their adult perspective (i.e. sending balloons and a card to a student in the hospital). Many teenagers, on the other hand, have another definition of

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what caring is and how they want to be cared for as students – seen as individuals and helped when having difficulty understanding the material. Teenagers, not interpreting teachers' actions as caring, feel that teachers are uncaring and give the teachers that feedback. Teachers see the teenagers' lack of appreciation and identify the teens as uncaring.

Another reason for the differences in student responses, might be a lack of language to describe caring relationships that are multidirectional. This absence of a complex language is probably the result of a lack of experiences that foster these types of relationships. The classroom of a caring teacher described by one of the students in this study portrays a very traditional classroom setting. The students are siting in rows, working diligently and quietly, while the teacher moves around checking for understanding. Our one-year long observations in these schools indicate that the teachers in both schools strove for this type of classroom environment. Although we observed some caring behaviors from the teachers towards individual students, none of the classrooms that we observed would be considered a caring community as described by Schaps and colleagues. Thus, when asked to describe a caring teacher, the students in this study drew on their experiences, which were different from those students whose teachers strive to develop caring communities in their classrooms.

Implications

According to Schaps, Watson, and Lewis (1996), the following approaches help foster a caring community within the classroom:

- Student involvement in shaping classroom norms and practices.

- Activities that help students and teachers to know each other as people.
- Activities that build a sense of unity within the class by joining students together in shared, enjoyable pursuits.
- Disciplinary approaches that deepen children's bonds with one another and with the teacher.
- Minimizing competitive activities.
- Collaborative pedagogies such as cooperative learning that allow children to work interdependently.
- Integrating discussions into the teaching of literature, history, science, and other subject areas about the lives and circumstances of diverse others, and about what it means to be compassionate, principled, and responsible.

The student responses in this study indicate that without these kinds of approaches students' understanding of caring and caring relationships will be limited. Students need to be involved in caring relationships in which they have opportunities to care for others – peers, teachers, others in and outside the school, and their surroundings. Only then will students be able to develop and ethic of caring and schools will become true caring communities.

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